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In the Shadow of Bunkers

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On a cold December afternoon in Srinagar a group of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel were busy picking up bricks and throwing them into an empty military truck. Other CRPF men stood guard, standing next to the debris near the edge of Amira Kadal Bridge. Until December 14 of last year, these bricks had made up one of the oldest bunkers in Srinagar. The bunker was one among the forty-four bunkers dismantled by CRPF, an undertaking that's been going on since late 2010. According to police records, there are 406 such bunkers spread across Srinagar city.

In the coming years bunkers may be dismantled in large numbers and slowly disappear from the roadsides, from the bridges and market places in the valley. But over the past two decades of their dominating presence, these structures have cast a permanent shadow that refuses to fade away from memories.

The removal of bunkers in Srinagar is part of eight "Confidence Building Measures" (CBMs) adopted by the government after massive civil unrest broke out in the Kashmir valley in the summer of 2010. Announced by the Indian government on September 25, 2010, these measures were meant to provide

“relief” and instill “a sense of security” and “confidence” in the people of the state.

Photo ©Javed Dar

After armed struggle broke out in the valley in 1989, the old bunkers became a ubiquitous sight, dotting across the landscape of the valley. For the local populace, however, bunkers created an aura of fear, surrounded as they were by multiple coils of concertina wires. Over the years, as CRPF gradually took over from the Border Security Force (BSF), many sandbag bunkers were given a wooden makeover with hut-like facades. CRPF undertook these makeovers as part of a “beautification drive” to render the security posts less threatening to tourists. The facelifts proved temporary. Soon, the wooden huts were replaced by cemented structures. But in December of last year Director General of Police Ashok Prasad announced that these cement bunkers would also be replaced, this time by “mobile bunkers” “to ensure security of the areas.”

* * *

There is an old sandbag bunker in our neighborhood in the outskirts of Srinagar. It’s been there since I was a kid. Despite having acquired an inverted conical roof made of green steel sheets designed to make it more attractive, the bunker is ugly. And threatening. The nozzle of a gun still points out onto the street.

It was the Kashmir of early 1990’s and I was a student of class seven. I must have been 12 or a little older when I became conscious of this bunker. I suddenly started paying attention to its dominating presence.

From the moment I became aware of the bunker’s presence in our neighborhood, I saw bunkers as structures that evoked fear. I wasn’t alone. This general dislike was internalized but left unexpressed out of fear in front of the bunker. On my way to school each day I felt the searching eyes of the trooper manning the station following me from the dark slit of the bunker. Every day I was forced to suffer through this encounter. Every day I was made aware of everything the bunker stood for. Every day I walked past the soldier looking out at the community, his gun resting on a sandbag, searching for something suspicious.

It was terrifying. Walking briskly past the bunker as the barrel of a soldier’s gun briefly trained on my body, I thought the same thing each morning: “*what if the bullet triggers out?*” And then I was past it. Later, returning from school, I had to relive the fear all over again.

Photos ©Javed Dar

In the garden of my childhood, bunker guns registered like thorns on an ugly flower.

The bunkers concretized fear. Those inside these security outposts were not the people I grew up with. They didn’t look like us. They didn’t speak our language, nor could they understand it. They followed our movements. They gave us orders. They kept their fingers on the triggers of their guns. When they left the bunkers, the soldiers moved around in military vehicles, blowing threatening whistles on the roads, never allowing any other vehicle to drive ahead of them, and driving dangerously fast. None of the troops were ever known by name in the neighborhood. Instead, they were all called *military wael*, a Kashmiri term for the military.

* * *

When I was little I thought the *military wael* were local policemen who had come to protect us from trouble. I assumed that they would eventually leave as soon as the trouble was over. I was wrong — they stayed on. In fact, they never left.

Nighttime, when the troops would return to their bunkers under the cover of darkness, was most frightening. They produced a terrifying confluence of noises — marching jackboots, incoherent shouts — that shattered the silence of night. Sudden and intermittent whistles from the bunkers would mix with the barking of dogs throughout the night, while roving search lights would scattered the darkness sometimes passing briefly across the windows of my room. In those days, sleep was hard to come by.

* * *

I still remember my father’s advice. One morning while walking me to the school bus stop he stopped and said “Never point your finger towards any bunker.”

“Why?” I would ask.

“You are too young to understand that...”

And that was all. Unsettled by my father's answer, I realized that something was terribly wrong in the neighborhood.

* * *

After school, I would play cricket with other local boys. The bunker was not that far from the small field where we would often gather to play. We knew we couldn't afford to hit the ball in that direction. If ever it strayed anywhere near the bunker, the day's play would end, everyone would go home, and the ball was considered *lost*.

The first time this happened we collected some money from whatever pocket change we had and bought a new ball. This time we were very careful about hitting the ball in the bunker's direction, and even set up a new rule. Anyone found guilty of hitting the ball towards the bunker was forced to either fetch the ball, or get a new one from their money. Whenever the ball was hit towards the bunker, whoever was responsible chose the second option.

One day I was guilty of sending the ball in the direction of the bunker. Play stopped. Deciding to break with tradition, I started walking up towards the bunker with slow, hesitant steps. The ball had luckily stopped some meters short of the bunker. Still, I quickly grabbed the ball and hurriedly walked back to the field. Ball in hand, feeling triumphant, I joined my friends who were anxiously waiting for me. The look on their faces suggested as if I had committed some exceptional act of bravery. The mere presence of the bunker affected our play.

* * *

On my morning rides to school on the bus, I came to regularly observe the bunkers scattered everywhere throughout the neighborhood streets. All of the bunkers shared common features: sand bags, guns, troops inside, coils and coils of barbed wire.

Our school bus would abruptly pull over and stop as soon as an Indian army convoy made an appearance on the road. The troopers atop the vehicles, blowing their whistles, brought civilian traffic to a standstill. They carried long batons in their hands, waving them menacingly and always ready to hit the roof of an offending vehicle coming their way. Sometimes they would they would smash the windowpanes of offending vehicles. All we could do was wait as the convoys — which seemed to stretch interminably — zoomed past like screeching whistles.

Looking out from the window of the school bus, I had also come to develop another favorite pastime — reading messages of Indian army and CRPF battalions painted in white letters on the walls of various bunkers and camps on the roads. These striking messages offered "help" to people:

"For help, please call this number...Courtesy: XYZ Battalion."

The road blockades, put up by the Indian military after every few kilometers, had messages for people painted in capital red letters over a white background:

"CRPF: With you, for you."

"Jawaan aur awaam, aman hai makaam."

"CRPF: Peacekeepers of the nation."

"Your security is our priority. Our only aim is your security."

"We need your cooperation. Thank you for your cooperation."

"Prove your identity."

"With compliments, from CRPF"

* * *

Over the years only the faces of troops manning the bunkers have changed. The siege remains. The bunkers remain, too. In fact, they have grown bigger with time. The troops still look out from the bunkers; the barrel of their guns still point out to the streets. And multiple coils of concertina wires still surround these ugly fortifications.

I have grown up. I no longer go to school.

My local sandbag bunker has grown up, too. Today, it sits in the secure company of a military camp, complimenting a bigger occupying structure. I try not to look at it much, or even acknowledge its presence. I avoid it when I can. But you can't ignore the bunker. Nobody can in Kashmir.

Majid Maqbool is a writer and journalist based in Kashmir. His writing has appeared in several Indian publications including Open Magazine, Hard News, and Kindle. He has also written for Aljazeera English, Dispatches International, Platform, and Ceasefire magazine. He is currently writing a book of essays covering the conflict in Kashmir.

Javed Dar born in Anantnag some 55 kilometers south of capital city Srinagar. He studied still photography and journalism in Asian Academy of Film and Television (AAFT) in film city Noida, India. Currently based in Srinagar. He is covering one of the known conflicts in the world Kashmir, which analysts say is a flashpoint in South Asia because of its strategic location. Apart from covering gunfights, unrest, protests and daily life. Dar has a keen interest for photo features, essays and news photo stories. He works for an International News Agency, his photographs and stories have appeared in prestigious newspapers, news magazines around the globe including Wall street journal, TIME lightbox, China Daily, Global Times amongst others. The above photographs of bunkers were taken in 2007.

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